

# Its History, Appeal and Mystique

By Paul Yeager

## THE EARLY YEARS

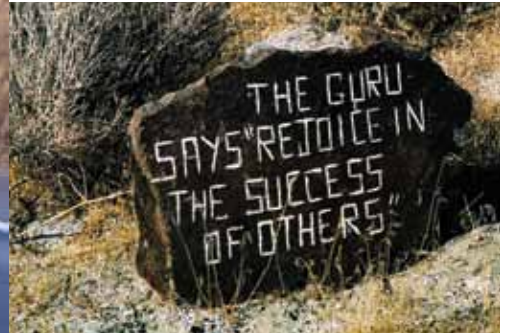
For a small, self-selecting subset of the world's motorcyclists, long-distance motorcycle riding is satisfying beyond reason. With no quarter given for mechanical, physical or emotional meltdowns, it is at once simple, grinding, cathartic and brutal. This principle is at play in a number of challenges that lead to Iron Butt Association membership and the coveted "World's Toughest Rider" license-plate frame.

The principle's ultimate expression is the Iron Butt Rally (IBR), an 11-day monster so devastating to body, mind, machine — and even its organizers — that mercifully it is held only once every two years.

Inspired by *Car & Driver's* One Lap of America, and brought to life by Mike Rose, the idea behind the IBR was relatively simple — to discover if a motorcyclist could circumnavigate the contiguous 48 states in eleven days. The first rally was launched over the Labor Day weekend in 1984 with a field of ten capable riders. By today's standards, the format was relatively easy. The Montgomeryville Cycle Center in Philadelphia served as the rally start/finish point and



STEVE HOBART



## Key Dates in IBA History

**1982** Mike Rose dreams up the **Iron Butt Rally** concept.

**1984** The first **Iron Butt Rally** was held in Philadelphia where four riders tied for first place.



pre-announced checkpoints, usually at motorcycle dealerships in Florida, California, Washington state and Maine, required entrants to appear within a narrow time window or face insurmountable penalties. At the end, four contestants tied for first place: Kim Davis, George Egloff, Alan Pease and Ed Thompson.

In 1985, George Egloff came back to win the rally outright and in 1986, Canadian Ross Copas took the top honors. This was also the year in which the Iron Butt Association was founded by Mike Kneebone and Richard and Faye Hoffman (Mike would later become the sole head of the IBA as well as the IBR because of his newsletter and day-to-day management responsibilities). A year later, Barry Norman, riding a Yamaha Venture, won the rally. But only four years after the first rider left Philadelphia, the event was cancelled in 1988 due to waning interest.

In 1990, at the urging of Jan Cutler of Nevada 1100 fame, Kneebone set out to revive the rally. He started by securing the rights to the name and taming the high-speed issues of the early rallies. Working with other long-distance riders, a renewed Iron Butt Rally was held in 1991 with 27 entrants. Teetering on the brink of extinction in 1988, the IBR has been held on odd years ever since and now attracts hundreds of wait-listed applicants from around the world hoping for a cancellation.

After 15 years of sending (mostly) lucid people to every imaginable remote location in the lower 48 states and Canada, the “Evil Lord Kneebone” as he is affectionately called, deferred

the entirety of this event to Lisa Landry in 2003. A veteran of the 2001 IBR, Landry now runs the show flawlessly from start to finish as Kneebone watches his protégé put on events that are as brilliantly executed as they are imaginative and rigorous.

Landry’s mark on the IBR is noteworthy as she completely altered the format of the rally, particularly as it relates to checkpoints. Earlier in its history, for instance, the rally route followed a four-corner model with required checkpoints in Florida, Maine, Washington and California. Later, the checkpoints were moved to locations other than these corner states but the basic premise remained the same: If you didn’t make the key checkpoints within a small time window, the penalties were stiff. Points were awarded for reaching those checkpoints, but the real points — the ones needed to win — were awarded for riding to more far-reaching bonus locations. Generally, point values were based on the deviation from a straight shot between the corners. However, the four-checkpoint scenario is no longer the standard. To provide exciting new riding opportunities, the four fixed checkpoint requirement was replaced with a mini-mum points-based system needed to become a finisher.

In the past, riders who racked up big miles by chasing the biggest bonuses also rode the winning route. Landry forever changed this expectation too. In the 2005 IBR and in a departure from past events, she not only limited many of the bonuses to daylight hours but also strategically planned it so the winning route incorporated a lot of locations with smaller point values. This meant having to plan and decipher well in advance where you want to be, at what hour, and on what day, in order claim the bonus. For those who cracked the time-distance code, they not only captured more points, but rode fewer miles.

But the 2003 IBR has to go down as being one of the most creative. In a variant on a theme from



BILL SHAW



Above (and facing page): **These are just two of many engraved stones at the Iron Butt Association memorial near Gerlach, Nevada. Each has a story to tell.** Left: **Riders gather at the start of the 2005 Iron Butt Rally in Denver, Colorado.**

**1986** The **Iron Butt Association** was officially founded by Mike Kneebone and Richard and Faye Hoffman.

**1989** The Iron Butt Association obtained the trademark and ownership of the “Iron Butt Rally,” as well as “**World’s Toughest Motorcycle Riders**,” “**World’s Toughest Motorcycle Competition**,” and “**World’s Toughest Motorcycle Rally**.”





## THE IRON BUTT ASSOCIATION:

the *Matrix* film, Kneebone had riders pick a red pill or blue pill before the start of the second leg. Riders choosing a red pill would be riding a more aggressive and challenging route that would also be the winning route. The blue pill was for everyone else who just wanted to survive. Kneebone warned riders that if they chose the red pill, “(your) life will immediately become hard, dirty, tiring, nasty and brutish.”

A hand was raised. “Is there any way the blue-pill route can win?”

“Yes,” Kneebone answered. “If every single rider on the red-pill route crashes, breaks down, goes home, is time-barred at the next checkpoint, or is abducted by aliens, it is theoretically possible that a rider on the blue-pill route could win. Still, I view it as unlikely.”

Just 25 hours into the rally, riders faced this choice: run with the lead dogs or run with the pack. About a third of riders accepted the challenge by taking the more aggressive route and just as Kneebone had predicted, riders who took the red pill held the top finishing positions.

As each rally leg becomes longer, complexity grows exponentially. More hours to plan per leg demand that more choices must be weighed and made. Extraordinary in every sense of the word, the Iron Butt Rally really is a seemingly insurmountable set of long distance challenges for mind and body. Beyond surviving what amounts to 11-consecutive SaddleSore 1000s, the real challenge is picking the most efficient routes to collect the most bonus points. Think a two- or even three-day rally leg presents a daunting, continental puzzle? Try unraveling it with a mile-mushed rally brain.

In recent years, rallies have become even more complex. This evolution sharpens the distinction between the rider who can win with the brute willpower to crank out massive miles versus the more cerebral rider with the brain and computer power to unravel the most-points-per-mile equation. Bob Higdon, IBA legal-affairs guru, once said, “A rider who is efficient is smart; a rider who bags big points is an animal; a rider who does both is the guy to beat in the Iron Butt.” Students following the rally’s evolution can only believe that the future trophies will be awarded to riders who possess the best of both camps, in other words, *The Unstoppable Thinker*.

## LONG DISTANCE CHALLENGES AND MOTORCYCLE

While the majority of Iron Butt Association members won’t have the opportunity to compete in the world’s premier long-distance rally, everyone is welcome to attempt other certified rides that range from difficult to extreme. Interestingly, the two rides that most members tackle first, the SaddleSore and the Bun Burner, were developed in the early 1980s not by the Iron Butt Association, but rather by the California Motorcycle Touring Association (CMTA).

Prior to 1993, the Iron Butt Association did not certify 1000-in-1 rides. Before that time and when asked, riders were referred to the sanctioning organization(s). However, the number of letters the IBA received asking to certify documented rides became so staggering that it acquiesced and agreed to verify a variety of long distance rides. At that same time, the IBA was working closely with Les Martin of the CMTA on certifications in California, Nevada and Oregon. So when Martin announced he was retiring in 1993, he graciously donated the SaddleSore and Bun



Above: A lonely stretch of highway outside Gerlach, Nevada. Left: The totem stands guard over the Iron Butt Association memorial while telling of previous events.

**1991** After a three-year hiatus, the **Iron Butt Rally** was revived and started in Reno, NV. Ron Major was the eventual winner of what is heralded as the start of the modern day endurance rally.

**1993** Les Martin of the California Motorcycle Touring Association graciously donates the **SaddleSore** and **Bun-Burner** ride programs to the Iron Butt Association.



Burner names to the Iron Butt Association.

Over time, the bar by which these challenges were being measured was raised. Distances once considered heroic were becoming commonplace and the growing list of long distance rides was limited only by the imagination of riders. The SaddleSore 1000, for instance, begat the SaddleSore 2000, 3000 and even 5000, ridden in two, three or five days. Then it was the In-State SaddleSore 1000 rides, which, as the name implies, required riders to log 1000 miles in 24 hours within state lines. And more recently, the Iron Butt Association has even certified thousand-mile adventures within the borders of selected cities including Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, New York and others. Even Dave McQueeney's 50CC challenge (Coast to Coast in 50 hours or less), once thought to be a lofty goal, has since morphed into an even more extreme ride: a 100CC challenge (Coast to Coast to Coast in less than 100 hours).

The fact that most *normal* motorcyclists don't find anything fun or rewarding about Iron Butt rides is part of what holds the LD community together. The more daunting the challenge, the

more delight Iron Butt riders take in it. Most riders have friends and family who think they are borderline lunatics, or maybe not so borderline, and happy only when they are sitting in a saddle and twisting a throttle. Rally veteran and long-distance legend Ardys Kellerman once said that Iron Butt riders are "another plateau of individual." Noted long distance rider Brian Roberts' wife, Jan, may have been a little more candid when she said long distance riders are so independent-minded and politically incorrect that many would call them renegades, past the line of the civilized, and beyond the fringe-dwellers.

For some LD riders, the appeal of extreme riding is about finding the solution to the time, speed, and distance equation or riding that perfect errant route. For others, it is nothing more complicated than the joy they receive by simply riding their motorcycle for hours, days and weeks on end. In this respect, 2001 Iron Butt Rally scribe Warren Harhay even has a word for it — motorcyclene. Every finisher of an endurance ride or rally has either tasted, or in some cases, feasted upon it. It is also said that motorcyclene oozes from the raw, wind-chapped pores of every long distance rider. "The communion of man and machine in pursuit of 'The Ride' is the Holy Grail of motorcycling," Harhay writes. "The Ride is the dispenser of motorcyclene, that most elusive and addictive narcotic of the motorcyclist, who is at one with his machine in pursuit of the fulfillment and joy of The Ride." Stated another way, long distance riding really is more about the ride than the destination.

Because this sport is inherently more dangerous than conventional motorcycle riding, safety has been at the forefront of long distance riding from the very beginning. A large part of the Iron Butt Association Web site is even devoted to reinforcing the message that LD riding is "dedicated to safe, long-distance motorcycle riding." Nearly all 29 points in the association's



Above and left: **The essence of "motorcyclene" can be found in the messages left on the rocks.**

Far left: **With members from over 44 countries and long distance challenges taking place all over the world, the Iron Butt Association is a true global community.**

**1997** The Iron Butt Association memorial in Gerlach, NV was established to honor fallen long distance riders.

Key Dates in IBA History





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popular “Archive of Wisdom” are related to safety. “Know your limits” is No. 1 and “forget about high speeds” is No. 2. Even the most anti-social, knee-dragging, bug-eyed rat-bike LD rider knows the IBA’s “safety first” mantra. This culture of safety is also what makes the LD community among the safest in all of motorcyclingdom.

## CHANGING OF THE GUARD

Motorcyclists are aging in the United States. Every study says the same thing. But the IBA appears to be deviating from this trend as the number of younger riders entering LD events — and finishing in steadily higher positions — is increasing. These new riders are also bringing in new energies and new ideas. It appears that a generational turning point is taking place within the Iron Butt Association, which bodes well for the future of the IBA and for long distance riding since things that evolve have a better chance of surviving.

In this respect, the Iron Butt Association — with its rallies, certified rides, web sites, social gatherings, seminars and Internet discussion sites — plays a crucial role in furthering the art and science of long-distance riding. New techniques and technologies are pioneered and happily shared with other riders. In addition to identifying better ways to equip motorcycles, enthusiasts also pass along the latest research on hydration, fitness, nutrition, heat exhaustion, hypothermia and even circadian rhythms.

New ideas are also being used to further improve motorcycles for long distance riding as well. The bikes ridden in the first Iron Butt Rally, for exam-

ple, were sparsely equipped when compared to today’s heavily adorned motorcycles. Paper maps and the rider’s familiarity with a region were all that pre-GPS long distance riders had at their disposal. Today, saddlebags, topcases, tankbags, mounts, and shelves are jammed with GPS units, radar detectors, satellite radios, cell phones, antennas, audio amps and mixers, MP3s, CBs, electric-clothing regulators, tubes for drinking (and in some cases peeing), pouches for food, gooseneck lamps for midnight map reading, thermometers, countdown clocks, alarm clocks, laptops, first-aid parts for bike and body, 12-volt tire pumps, puncture kits and riding gear that has to work from 20 degrees to 120 degrees. Therefore, when rally riders select their mount of choice these days, they consider a bike’s electrical power capacity as much as horsepower — a problem not even imagined in 1984.

Most of these accessories, it should be pointed out, are not designed for motorcycles. Fortunately, many LD riders are tinkerers or engineers who delight in custom, personality-skewed installations. A very conspicuous example of modifying something that is not designed for use on a bike is a custom-fitted auxiliary gas tank. Since a minute spent sitting idle at a gas station is a minute lost to their competition, a minute thrown away or, worst of all, a minute lost to precious sleep, they are a virtual necessity for every serious endurance rider. Collectively, though, the aim of these accessories is to help with navigation, keep the rider moving, and to reduce physical and mental stress. Less stress equals less fatigue equals a higher average speed equals more miles.

## THE ROAD TO GERLACH

This wind-swept spot became a Mecca to the long-distance world thanks to Jan Cutler and Steve Losofsky, former owners of Reno BMW. They created some of the zaniest long-distance



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**2003** Kneebone officially hands over the reigns of the Iron Butt Rally to **Lisa Landry**.



rallies ever held and most of them began, ended or went through Gerlach at one time or another, as did the Iron Butt and other rallies.

Once a year, long-distance pilgrims from across the continent gather at an event known as Gerlachfest. Under the extraordinary Nevada night sky, they build a bonfire and pay homage to and honor fallen LD riders. All are remembered for their achievements in and contributions to the LD community as Iron Butt Association Chief Technical Inspector Dale “Warchild” Wilson reads the Names of the Dead; toasts are made, memories are shared, and tears are shed.

From the memorial, one can also take in an engulfing view of featureless, flat emptiness that flows beyond the curve of the earth. The memorial is located at the base of a low mountain range that overlooks a mud-flat playa and the Black Rock Desert. It is here that you will find a collection of stones engraved with the names of fallen riders — the Circle of Honor. Some died riding, some died naturally, and some

died by other means, but all are memorialized here forever. The emptiness reminds you that this special place is in the middle of nowhere; a place that will not visibly change during the lifetimes of many generations. It is a fitting location for a memorial.

And on a slope just above the memorial’s Circle of Honor is a familiar tool of the LD trade: a picnic table labeled “Iron Butt Motel.” It is a good place to lower the sidestand, relax and ponder “koyyanisqatsi,” the Hopi word for “life *out* of balance.” But “life *in* balance” is really what long distance riding is all about — going to the edge and keeping a balance. And for LD riders, their quest to maintain a balance, called “Taiowa’s Way” by the Hopi, is what this sport is all about. —

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*Above and facing page: **The Iron Butt Association memorial outside Gerlach, Nevada.***

**2007** IBA membership hits the **30,000** milestone with members from 44 countries.

